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ABSTRACT

In spring 1978, a study was conducted at a large community college in Southern California to determine what washroom graffiti revealed about the concerns of community college students. Graffiti were monitored for a 1-month period in one male and one female washroom in each of six classroom and general purpose buildings. Graffiti were copied verbatim on index cards and assigned to one of 17 categories: sexual request, political, sexual insult, sexual humor, general insult, racial insult, sexual/scatalogical words, names, racial/sexual insult, cry for help, general humor, moral, romantic, religious, drugs, general racial, and miscellaneous. An analysis of the 379 units of graffiti copied indicated: (1) men and women produced roughly equal amounts of graffiti; (2) male graffiti tended to fall in the areas of sexual requests (18.6%), political comments (11.3%), sexual insults (9.6%), and sexual humor (7.9%); (3) female graffiti tended to be in the categories of romantic (28.1%), names (18.3%), miscellaneous (8.8%), religious (7.4%), and moral (6.9%); (4) for every erotic reference in the women's washrooms there were two romantic ones, while in the men's washrooms there were ten erotic references for every romantic reference; (5) the general purpose, library, and administration buildings had the greatest amount of graffiti; and (6) 44% of the graffiti in the humanities building had homosexual references, compared with only 8% in the science building. (HB)

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College Student Graffiti: Clues to Student Needs, Conflicts, Frustrations and Preoccupations

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JC 840 201

Running Head: College Student Graffiti: Clues to Student Needs

Presented by Dr. John F. Workman at the Fall Meeting of the California College Personnel Association, in Asilomar, California, 1983.

Washroom graffiti can help us understand what is on students' minds as well as the differing inner worlds of young men and young women.

Graffiti are an ancient manifestation. Sailors arriving on the Island of Crete during the Roman occupation left coins in a pay toilet and wrote messages on the wall. Graffiti were found in Pompeii where the themes of love, sex and politics seem strikingly familiar (Lion, 1978). Compare, for example, "Proculus, support Sabinus and in exchange he'll support you", with "Ed Davis is a facist" or "Republicans eat sh--", or "Lucillia sells her body" with "I only know one girl who will do anything you ask of her, call...".

Graffiti found in college washrooms can be perceived as meaningless, lewd, hostile scribbling or as a reflection of feelings, thoughts, conflicts and current interests. A number of previous investigators including Webb, Campbell, Schwartz and Sechrest (1966) and Reisner (1967) believe the latter. In fact, according to Bess, Horowitz, Morgenstein, and Silverstein (1976), graffiti produced by college students may be an expression of stress associated with the developmental tasks of young adulthood.

In regard to differences between the quantity and content of male and female student graffiti, Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhardt (1953) found that males produced significantly more

graffiti than females. In a more recent study, however, Wales and Brewer (1976) reported that high school girls produced 3.5 times as much graffiti as high school boys, apparently as the result of changing social sanctions and greater freedom of expression for women. Wales and Brewer found that female inscriptions tended to be more romantic while male writings were more erotic.

There is also some indication that graffiti content are related to field of study. Landy and Steele (1967) reported that washroom writing in law, art, and computer science buildings dealt more with these fields than did writing in general use buildings.

Method

This study was designed to find out what washroom graffiti could tell us about the concerns of community college students. What is on their minds that they feel strongly enough about or free enough about to write on washroom walls? Are men's and women's concerns and frustrations basically the same and are the sexes equally prolific at graffiti writing? Are there apparent differences between fields of study?

We conducted our investigation at a large community college in Southern California during a one month period in the Spring of 1978. Graffiti were monitored during this period in one male and one female washroom in each of six classroom and general purpose buildings.

Graffiti units produced were copied verbatim on index cards and sorted into the seventeen categories developed by Wales and Brewer (1976) on the basis of what appeared to be the main thrust of the unit, each graffito being used only once. Six community college students earned independent study credit in a Psychology course for copying the units and assisting the principal investigator in the content analysis. Data were analyzed for quantity and content by sex and by building.

Results

Of the 379 graffiti units produced and recorded, 53% appeared in women's washrooms. Since approximately this same proportion

of students were women, the sexes appear to have been about equally productive.

Males were more likely than females to write sexual requests, political remarks, sexual insults, and sexual humor. Most of the sexual references are unprintable (even with dashes), the mildest being "I love you Debbie", and "I love girls". They wrote, "Wanted young male no old queens" and "Fags are abnormal". They stenciled "Chicano Power", "PLO", and "F -- the KKK and NAACP".

Table 1

Rank Ordering of Graffiti

Categories By Males and Females

Rank	Male	f	%	Female	f	%
1	Sexual Request	(33)	18.6	Romantic	(57)	28.1
2	Political	(20)	11.3	Names	(37)	18.3
3	Sexual Insult	(17)	9.6	Misc.	(18)	8.8
4	Sexual Humor	(14)	7.9	Religion	(15)	7.4
5	General Insult	(12)	6.8	Moral	(14)	6.9
6	Racial Insult	(12)	6.8	Cry for Help	(10)	5.0
7	Sex./Scat. Words	(12)	6.8	Political	(8)	4.0
8	Names	(11)	6.2	Sexual Insult	(8)	4.0
9	Rac./Sex. Insult	(9)	5.1	Sexual Request	(8)	4.0
10	Misc.	(8)	4.5	General Insult	(7)	3.5
11	Cry for Help	(8)	4.5	Sexual Humor	(7)	3.5
12	General Humor	(7)	4.0	Sex./Scat. Words	(5)	2.5
13	Moral	(7)	4.0	General Humor	(4)	2.0
14	Romantic	(4)	2.2	Drugs	(2)	1.0
15	Religion	(2)	1.1	Gen. Racial	(2)	1.0
16	Drugs	(1)	0.6	Racial Insult	(0)	0.0
17	General Racial	(0)	0.0	Rac./Sex. Insult	(0)	0.0

Women still drew hearts inscribed with "Bobby and Donna". They were philosophical: "There is love all around you just have to find it", and "All people unite together in peace! All colors blend together for the most perfect of colors. Look past the physical look to the mental being. Be what you want to be ...". There was a long sequence about Jesus which began with "Jesus is the answer", went on to "If Jesus is the answer - what is the question", and ended with "That is because if you knew who he really was you wouldn't say that". On the political side, there was "Stop Reagan intervention in USA".

There were apparent cries for help among both men and women. For example, "I am dying;" "I need help! Where am I going in this world?" to which was added "Try God", and then "Who?"; and "I am horney and lonely and want to die". There was the word "Death". And in another sequence, a drawing of a gun.

Humor sometimes flowed. "No graffiti? Wnat kind of school is this", must have been written after walls were washed. "Save water Shower with a friend" was another female contribution. A male referred to the washroom as "The VC Gas Chamber".

One woman student wrote, "It's rather sad that the level of graffiti in LAVC is somewhere around 5th grade (and this is no exception)". What would she have said about graffiti in the men's rooms?

There was remarkably little reference by either sex to drugs or race.

In general, as Table 2 indicates, erotic writing dominated for men and romantic writing, for the women. [χ = 74.7, df=1, $p < .01$]

Table 2

Tabulation of Male and Female Graffiti

By Erotic and Romantic Catagories

	Male		Female	
Catagories	n	%	n	%
Erotic	85	95.5	28	32.9
Romantic	4	4.5	57	67.1
Total	89	100	85	100

Note. "Erotic is defined as the total of all categories containing explicit sexual or scatological writings. Included are the catagories of sexual insult, racial/sexual insult, sexual humor, sexual request, and sexual/scatological words.

Other significant differences between male and female graffiti were as follows:

(1) When the various catagories of insults were collapsed and summed, males were more likely to produce insulting inscriptions [t (64)= 5.40, $p < .01$]

(2) When sexual humor and general humor were combined, males produced significantly more humorous remarks [t (31) = 2.21, $p < .05$]

(3) Females tended to produce more religious and moral inscriptions [t (27) = 3.12, $p < .01$]

(4) Males wrote more political graffiti [t (27) = 2.69, $p < .01$]

Table 3

Rank Ordering of Buildings

By Graffiti Produced

Rank	Male	f	Female	f	Total	f
1	Administration	(53)	Library	(65)	Library	(101)
2	Library	(36)	Art	(41)	Administration	(89)
3	Behavioral Science	(34)	Administration	(36)	Behavioral Science	(65)
4	General Classroom	(30)	Behavioral Science	(31)	Physical Education	(56)
5	Engineering	(17)	General Classroom	(26)	Art	(48)
6	Art	(7)	Engineering	(3)	Engineering	(20)

Table 3 relates graffiti quantity to type of building. The general purpose buildings, Library and Administration, ranked highest, perhaps because of their heavy use.

Content differences among the buildings did not appear to be significant, with one exception. Forty-four percent of graffiti writing in the Humanities building contained homosexual references compared with only 8 percent in the Science building.

Summary and Discussion

Graffiti appearing on washroom walls in a large community college during a one month period were copied verbatim and catagorized according to a system developed by Wales and Brewer (1976). One men's and one women's washroom in each of six classroom and general purpose buildings were used in the study. Data were analyzed by sex in terms of quantity, content, and building use.

Consistent with a study by Wales and Brewer (1976), male and female students produced proportionately the same amount of graffiti. Differences in content, however, were striking. Women's writing was more romantic, more moral and religious. Men's writing was more erotic, more aggressive, more political, and more humorous.

In terms of their feelings and preoccupations as reflected in the graffiti they wrote, the men and women students appeared to live in different inner worlds: the men's, swaggering, macho,

and erotic; the women's, romantic and moralistic. Neither world is realistic. Nor are they easily bridged by peers or counselors. Both sexes wrote cries for help -- some specifically articulated and others reflected in erotic comments or macho bragging. Men seemed to express angry feelings more often than women. The suggestion of Bess et al. (1976) that the graffiti of young college students reflect stress associated with developmental tasks seems very relevant.

The lack of content differences between classroom buildings probably occurred because even students who have declared majors were not yet specializing; many drifted from one major to another. On the other hand, there was a high degree of concern about homosexuality in the Humanities building, particularly when compared with graffiti in the Science building.

Graffiti on washroom walls tells us something as student development specialists. Probably it reveals more about younger than older students since it is hard to picture a fifty or sixty year old writing on a washroom wall. (We do know an assistant professor in his thirties, however, who was so irked by a sequence critical of his department that he added a few terse lines.)

Unfortunately for researchers, graffiti is anonymous. Were the writers a true cross-section of students at the college? Or were they a fringe group whose thoughts and feelings were atypical? Our assumption is somewhere in between: that the

graffiti writers were representative of a significant portion of the younger student population, a portion who were telling us not only about the thoughts, feelings, and conflicts of themselves but of many others. From this point of view, differences in graffiti content may be helpful to counselors in relating to men and women students as well as in helping them relate to each other.

Comparable studies in universities may reflect a different picture, especially among a more sophisticated group of women students who have lost some of their romanticism. At the community college level, however, where younger students are striving for intimacy, the women appear to define it as romantic "love" and the men, as what Erikson (1983) has called "recreational sex".

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